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IMETROPOLITAN THEATRE



The Boston Redevelopment Authority staff in the Fall of 1974 undertook a feasibility study for the renovation of the Metropolitan Theatre (now called the Music Hall) as a much-needed performing arts complex with seating for more than 4,000. We concluded that a more intensive architectural analysis was warranted, so in December 1974 we commissioned Cambridge Seven Associates to do the work, which was completed in February 1975.

In their evaluation, Cambridge Seven considered the space and program requirements of the performing arts groups that had expressed strong interest in the Metropolitan Theatre renovation, namely the Boston Ballet, the Boston University Celebrity Series, and the Boston Opera Association. They also examined the possibility of a flexible plan to provide the smaller seating capacity desired by other potential users such as the Opera Company of Boston. The theatre owner, Tufts-New England Medical Center, has indicated a willingness to consider potential re-use of the building as a performing arts center.

The performing arts organizations and the BRA are now evaluating the Metropolitan Theatre project. We anticipate that renovation will prove to be an economic and beneficial means of providing a theatre for the performing arts in Boston's entertainment district.

We hope you will enjoy this brief history of the Metropolitan Theatre and will look forward, as we do, to its second debut as one of Boston's finest cultural facilities.

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Robert T. Kenney, Director
Boston Redevelopment Authority



The Metropolitan Theatre, one of Boston's most elaborate and ornate "movie palaces," has to its credit 50 years of moving pictures, stage shows, opera, ballet, and concerts. Boston audiences have seen the best of American entertainment on its stage, from the Twenties when Rudy Vallee was "King of the Vagabond Lovers," to World War II when Al Jolson, Bob Hope, and Dorothy Lamour performed at War Bond drives, to more recent times and the varied talents of Rudolph Nureyev, Jan Pierce, Johnny Ray, and notable rock artists. From the beginning, the Metropolitan Theatre has been closely associated with the cultural history of Boston and the entertainment and architectural history of the country.

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THE SPIRIT OF



THETWENTIES

The Metropolitan Theatre, now called the Music Hall, was born in 1925, in the middle of the Jazz Age. An era of "boom and bust," it was one of the richest creative periods in American entertainment history. It was the heyday of George Gershwin, Jerome Kern, and Irving Berlin; their music was played by Paul Whiteman's band, danced to by Florenz Zeigfeld's dancing girls, and sung by Al Jolson and Rudy Vallee. The popular dances were the Charleston and the Black Bottom; swing had not yet been invented, and the waltz was considered "Victorian."

Larger than life, with appeal for everyone, were the movies. In theatres throughout the country, the "silver screen" glorified and exaggerated reality. Film idols such as Rudolph Valentino, the Barrymores, Douglas Fairbanks, and Mary Pickford held adoring audiences spell-bound, while comedians like Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and even Mickey Mouse coaxed them into uproarious laughter. The motion picture, still silent but vivid, offered Americans a recreational and emotional experience never before imagined.

"Going to the movies" got its start as an American pleasure in 1905, when a Pittsburgh businessman showed a 20-minute silent film, with piano accompaniment, in a rented store-front. Admission was 5 cents. The immediate success of this small enterprise, soon dubbed "nickelodeon," led to similar ventures elsewhere and every American town soon had its nickelodeon. The public demand for films grew rapidly, with movie makers only too happy to oblige, until by the 1920's, the film industry ranked fourth in the nation, and six million people attended the movies each week of the year.

Promoters competed for these millions of eager moviegoers by offering live entertainment and lavish facilities which turned the activity of movie going into a total recreational experience.

The live entertainment consisted of stage show "spectaculars" of a scale later used by Busby



Berkeley in the movies of the 1930's and probably best compared today with the shows at Radio City Music Hall in New York. These "unit presentations," as they were called, were composed of extravagant settings, dancing girls, juggling acts, magic shows, and any other specialty number that would capture the attention and visual senses of the audience. The specialty numbers were developed by the theatre chains that owned most of the large movie houses; they traveled to all the theatres owned by the chain, but were supported by the resident company, or "unit," of the specific theatre.

As profits accrued and the shows became even more lavish, there arose a need for theatres designed specifically for the combined presentation of film and show. This was the beginning of the golden age of the "movie palace," the American pleasure dome.



The building also, however, had to meet certain practical requirements. The lobbies and foyers had to accommodate large crowds and allow their passage through to other parts of the theatre. The auditorium and stage had to be planned so that an audience of thousands could see and hear the wide range of live entertainment — the orchestra, soloists and dancing girls, and the accompanying stage settings — and could also see the movie screen.

As audiences grew and competition between theatres increased, the movie palaces became more and more ornate, reaching extremes of fantastic design that borrowed from every architectural genre imaginable, from Baroque to Persian to Oriental, and back.

8



The Metropolitan Theatre reflects the imaginative freedom that was fundamental in the design of a movie palace. Considered a paragon in its day, it captured a noble place in the annals of movie palace history.

Originally conceived as a theatre and hotel complex by the initial developer, Nathan Gordon, who was an early Boston movie mogul, the project idea changed during the early stages to a combined theatre and 14-story office structure. Near the end of construction, the development was sold to Paramount-Publix Theatre Corporation, a major national chain, which ran the theatre and leased out the office space.

Cost of the total project, which occupied more than an acre of land within Boston's established theatre district, was reported at \$8 million. The theatre itself was the second largest in the country and one of the 8 or 10 largest in the world, with Boston promoters boasting its seating capacity of 5,000.

From the simple block-like exterior of the theatre building, it was impossible for the patron to imagine the splendor of the theatre inside, which had been designed in the well-known tradition of the European opera house.

The generous proportions of the interior were organized so that theatre-goers could circulate through the lobbies and in and out of the auditorium with ease and safety. The five-story high interior space was divided into the main floor, composed of three lobbies and an auditorium with stage; the mezzanine level, including loge seating and a columned promenade; and another upper level with additional balcony seating and a second promenade. The underground level was considered unique for its large wood-paneled lounge, called the Grand Lounge, with an adjacent French-styled rest lounge for women and a smoking parlor for men.

THE GRAND LOBBY

11

Stirring the greatest admiration was the 90-foot high main lobby, called the Grand Lobby, with the Grand Stairway, which had been inspired by the Paris Opera House. To create a palatial environment fitting for European royalty — and the Boston movie-goer — the ornamentation and interior decor of this area was selected to suggest the era of Louis XIV. The glittering atmosphere was achieved through seemingly endless quantities of Italian marble columns, crystal chandeliers, plush crimson carpeting, large mirrors draped with velvet bunting, gold leaf applied to doors and column capitals, and painted murals on the vaulted ceilings. The murals, done by Louis Amerosi, an eminent Italian mural painter, depicted scenes from the History of Music and Drama. More than a quarter million dollars in art treasures were said to hang on the walls throughout the interior.



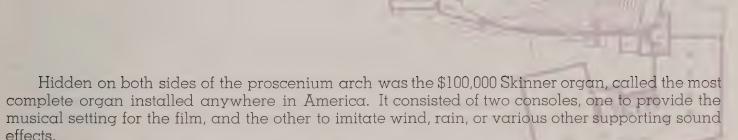


THE AUDITORIUM

The success of the theatre depended on the pleasure of the patron; thus, every seat in the Auditorium had to insure full registration of all sights and sounds. To solve such problems, a steeply sloping deep balcony without columnar support was used, and interior materials were skillfully selected for their capacity to absorb sound and prevent echoes. The curved surfaces on the ceiling above and around the gold-leaf proscenium arch were designed to serve as sounding boards. These offered space for murals and also softened the contrast between the stage and the rest of the Auditorium. This relationship was an important unifying aspect of the design since it created a sense of intimacy in the large Auditorium.

The ceiling was in the shape of a vast dome, in the center of which a golden sunburst of crystal radiated soft light. Around the sunburst and covering the entire ceiling were murals painted by the artist Phillip Kellogg; like the murals on the Grand Lobby ceiling, they depicted various aspects of music and drama. The arched walls on both sides of the Auditorium were covered by black mirrors, similar to those in the Palace of Versailles, which were bordered by elaborate gilt frames and pilasters. Special attention was given to two arched proscenium exits, which held carved statuary in the French Rococo tradition.

The design of the orchestra pit embodied the most modern technology of the 1920's. Not only was it large enough to seat the full resident orchestra of the Metropolitan Theatre, but in addition, it rested on an elevator platform that could raise the entire 55-piece orchestra for a mysterious or dramatic appearance.



The theatre stage was designed to accommodate both the movie screen and the live entertainment presented on the stage. Thus width, but not depth, was provided, since the unit presentations usually involved large sets with activity occurring at the front of the stage.

THE ARCHITECT OF THE METROPOLITAN

The Metropolitan was designed in the movie palace tradition by the nationally known theatre architect, Clarence Blackall. Born in 1857, Blackall began his practice of architecture in Boston in the late 1880's. By this time, he had a Masters degree in Fine Arts and had done graduate studies at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. This varied background gave him a sophistication which set his visions beyond most other theatre architects.

Blackall's practice also differed from other movie palace architects because it was not limited to designs for theatres. As senior partner of the firm Blackall, Clapp, and Whittemore, he designed some of Boston's most eminent structures: the Little Building and several newspaper buildings, including the Boston Herald and Boston Post buildings. He was also an associate architect for the Copley-Plaza Hotel. Yet the firm was known best for its theatres in Boston: the Colonial, Wilbur, and Tremont Theatres. In conjunction with theatre design, Blackall himself had a long association with Professor Wallace C. Sabine, who was considered the founder of the science of architectural acoustics.

By 1925, the date of the Metropolitan, Blackall was one of the city's leading architects; he was respected and honored by his colleagues, who had elected him Secretary-Treasurer of the Rotch Fellowship and Secretary of the Boston Society of Architects.

AMENITIES

"Going to the movies" held a multitude of meanings; the motion picture was often incidental to the sheer pleasure of spending time in an elegant, catered environment. Consequently, a diversity of activities was considered a primary requisite in satisfying the recreational needs of the theatre's patrons; many people spent the entire day or evening at the theatre, using it as a quasi-private club and gathering place.

"A corps of 100 cadet ushers, rigorously trained," was advertised as available to assist the customer through the myriad of available activities. Among the special features was a small orchestra that played continually in the Grand Lobby for the enjoyment of loungers relaxing in one of the many elegant chairs or couches there or on the Mezzanine promenade. While enjoying these opulent surroundings, rich and poor alike could also indulge in the extra-theatrical occupation of people-watching. Off the Grand Lobby was a Red Cross room with trained nurses and emergency equipment for those who felt "weary and faint." Next to this was a small press room for the use of visiting reporters.

The underground level was divided into three lounges, "capable of holding 3,000 persons." These provided additional space for relaxing and socializing and were supplied with tables and other equipment necessary for bridge, billiards, and newspaper-reading. For a few years, a small restaurant-cafe was situated here and music for dancing was provided. The men's smoking parlor and women's "boite de poudre," as the restroom was called, continued the theme of elegance and were outfitted with the finest appointments.







PEOPLE AND EVENTS

It was Boston Mayor James Michael Curley who turned over the first spade of dirt at the groundbreaking for the Metropolitan Theatre in 1925, and who also paid tribute on opening night to the theatre's developer and financial backers, saying, "It required great courage to attempt such an enterprise, but the men back of the enterprise had faith in Boston." The manager, E. F. Albee, father of playwright Edward Albee, received one of the few remaining keys to the City of Boston from Mayor Curley for "his outstanding contribution toward the completion and organization of the entire project." Massachusetts Governor Alvan T. Fuller joined Mayor Curley opening night and also offered congratulations to the architect, builder, and management.

Nothing was spared to insure successful productions at the Metropolitan Theatre. The spectacular live shows that shared the stage with the film feature in the early years of the theatre were directed by John Murray Anderson, famous for his New York musical revues. Anderson employed a resident corps de ballet for these shows, as well as a large scenery department that designed and constructed the sets for each production. By 1935, a photography department had been added to take pictures of the shows to avoid duplication. Anderson's orchestra leader was Fabian Sevitsky, the nephew of the famed conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Serge Koussevitsky. Like other movie palace orchestra conductors, Sevitsky used his position as a stepping stone in his career, later becoming conductor of the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra.

During the Depression, financial difficulties and then Federal anti-trust suits brought the unit presentations to an abrupt halt. The live stage shows continued, however, since individual acts could still be booked through the theatre management. During the 1930's and 1940's, the big bands were the most popular attraction: Paul Whiteman, Benny Goodman, and Gene Krupa all appeared at the Metropolitan; as before, the live entertainment played between the showings of the feature film. Radio programs also played the theatre with such starring attractions as Bob Hope, Jerry Colona, Jack Benny, and Martha Raye. A different show was booked each week. This tradition continued until late in the 1940's when television claimed the theatre audience, forcing most performers out of live entertainment.

During the 1950's, the Metropolitan Theatre became best known as the haven for the New York Metropolitan Opera. The Boston Opera House had been demolished in 1957, and the New York company, after trying other Boston theatres during its yearly appearances, finally determined that the Metropolitan Theatre was best suited to its needs.

One of the most memorable events at the Metropolitan occurred during a stage appearance made by Rudy Vallee in 1931. As he sang "Oh Give Me Something to Remember You By," an obliging Harvard student hurled a large, ripe grapefruit at Vallee (a Yale graduate), provoking a near-riot.

Another glorious moment in the Metropolitan's history occurred during World War II when Hollywood pin-up star Dorothy Lamour appeared to raise money for War Bonds. Theatre chroniclers recount that \$10 million was pledged to the war effort that night by an enthusiastic audience. It must have been the spirit of the evening, however, because only a fraction of the pledges were collected the next day.

In 1952, Johnny Ray, the singing idol of the bobby-soxers, was engaged to play the Metropolitan Theatre. He was dubbed "the Prince of Wails" because his most famous song was entitled "Cry." At his concert, in an attempt to be humourous, some enterprising youth set off a sizeable amount of tear gas during the singing of that song. The audience did, in fact, cry.



THEMUSICHALLERA

The Metropolitan Theatre closed in 1962. It re-opened later that year, under new management, as the Music Hall, a combined facility for first-run movies and large touring productions of the performing arts. Although minor changes were made to the marquee and to the decor of the Grand Lobby and the seating areas of the Auditorium, the stage and underground dressing rooms were left largely unaltered.

Despite the poor condition of the dressing rooms and the size limitations of the stage — mainly its lack of depth — a constant flow of local and international ballet, dance, and opera groups has appeared at the Music Hall: the Bolshoi and Kirov Ballets, the Royal Danish Ballet, Royal Ballet of London, Swedish Ballet, Boston Ballet, Moiseyev Dancers, Stuttgart Opera, and the New York Metropolitan Opera. Many Bostonians have come to associate the Music Hall with the Boston Ballet's annual performance of "The Nutcracker," as well as with recent concerts by rock operas and rock bands. Certainly the diversity of productions is ample testimony to the versatile appeal of this cultural hall.

The contemporary Bostonian is delighted with the total experience of an evening at the Music Hall, just as the movie-goers of the 1920's enjoyed the overall environment of the Metropolitan Theatre. The splendid decor is an ideal setting for the romantic spirit embodied in ballet, dance, and opera events, extending the flight into fantasy begun on the stage. The mood is set from the first moments of arrival into the foyer, heightened during the performance, and further promoted during intermission. For the audience, the theatre spaces are another dramatic adventure, complementing the drama on stage. Amid the aura of the plush and gilt interior, in the Grand Lobby, on the Grand Stairway, and around the lofty, columned promenades, the audience, encouraged by the surroundings, participates in its own exhibitanting, stage-like experience of being seen and seeing all.

The magic of this theatre would be difficult to replace.

CREDITS

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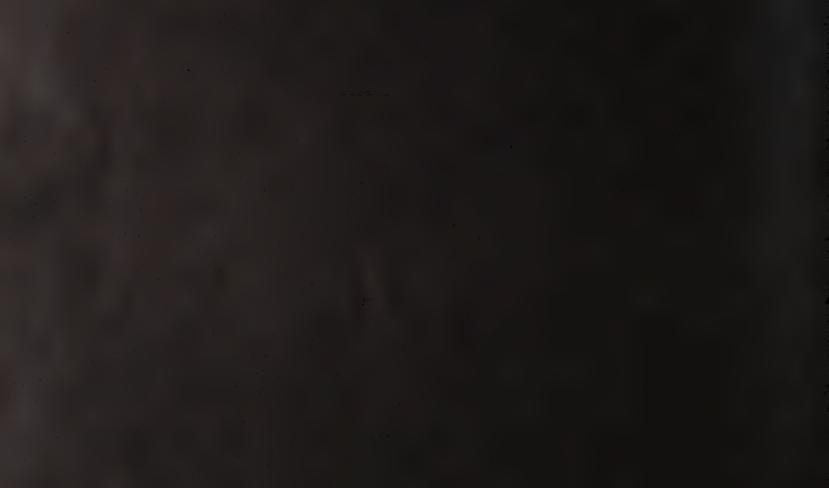
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